DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 115 526 SO 008 742

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TITLE What Teachers Need: Assessing the Professional and Academic Preparedness of Teachers for Their Roles as Political Educators.
PUB DATE Nov 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Atlanta, Georgia, November 26-29, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS American Government (Course); Civics; Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Assessment; Educational Improvement; Educational Research; Elementary Education; Junior High Schools; *Political Science; Professional Training; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Background; *Teacher Education; Teacher Evaluation; Teaching Quality

ABSTRACT

In an effort to assess teacher preparation for political education, elementary and junior high school teachers in the metropolitan Atlanta area were surveyed to determine their backgrounds and professional needs for political/civic education. Three hundred and one teachers of fifth, sixth, and seventh grades responded to the questionnaire. The study revealed minimal academic preparation in political science, with the overwhelming majority of the teachers reporting American government as the single course in their college education. A full 20 percent of the teachers reported that they had no undergraduate training in political science. As means of improving their professional competencies, the majority of teachers expressed a definite preference for more practical, on-the-job improvement programs as opposed to graduate and summer studies. The teachers indicated that they most desired brief, flexible curriculum materials that deal with political aspects of current social issues. Few called for the usual hardback social studies textbook. As for teaching aids, the middle grade teachers expressed the most interest in guidelines to classroom activities that would provide students with opportunities to participate in group decision making and problem solving. (Author/DE)

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What Teachers Need: Assessing the Professional and Academic Preparedness of Teachers for Their Roles as Political Educators *

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How well prepared are social studies teachers to assume their roles in the political education of young Americans? Evaluations of the adequacy of teacher preparation for political education are often based on student performance. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress survey of the political knowledge and attitudes of young Americans[1] has generated some strong criticisms of instruction in the schools. Stephen Bailey, Vice President of the American Council on Education, for one, claimed that the test revealed "some of the blinders with which educators conceive of the problems of communicating basic information about the ways in which the political system works."[2]

Such criticism makes the widely-held assumption that social studies must teach a basic knowledge of government and politics while it prepares students to be competent participants in politics. Tests of student performance may provide some indicators about how well teachers have attended to these traditional goals. However, they do not reveal specifics about the teachers' academic and professional preparedness for promoting these goals of citizenship education.

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* Presented at the National Council for the Social Studies, 55th annual meeting, College and University Faculties Session, November 26, 1975, Atlanta, Georgia.

One major effort to assess the specifics of teacher preparedness for political education was launched in a series of surveys of teachers in elementary schools conducted in 1973 in several sections of the country under the auspices of the Elementary School Political Science Curriculum Project of The American Political Science Association.[3] As part of that data collection effort, elementary teachers in metropolitan Atlanta were surveyed to determine their backgrounds and professional needs for political/civic education.

Through the central office of each cooperating district, questionnaires were distributed to the teachers in a representative sample of elementary schools in three metro-Atlanta school districts. Of the 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 60% were returned. This paper concerns data from the questionnaires of the 301 "middle grades" teachers (i.e., fifth, sixth and seventh grade teachers) who returned their questionnaires. Ninety of these were from fifth grade teachers, 110 from sixth grade teachers and 101 were from seventh grade teachers. Specific concerns of this analysis are: 1) their content preparation in government and politics, and 2) the professional assistance which they consider important to improving instruction in government and politics.

Political Science Background

When asked to indicate the number and types of political science courses taken in college, the middle grades teachers revealed that they had very limited formal training in government and politics. One fifth

of the teachers had taken no political science course at all. When they reported taking a college political science course, it was usually American Government. Seventy-five percent of the teachers had taken a formal course in American Government. Very few had studied any other area of government and politics. Only 14% claim to have studied international politics and only 10% had studied comparative government.

Despite their limited background in political studies, few had taken additional work in social studies beyond their college requirements. Only 17% had ever attended any type of social studies workshop or summer institute.

Need for Additional Education

How did these middle grade teachers perceive their personal educational needs in regard to political education? The teachers rank-ordered four types of improvement programs: informal consultation with a subject specialist, an intensive summer program, a continuing school-year group development program and a year of graduate study. Teachers expressed the strongest preference for a program which would operate continuously throughout the school year and which would allow them to work with others on the job to develop and test ideas. Their second choice was a program of informal consultation with a subject specialist who would possess an understanding of classroom problems. The lowest priority was given to the training option which would take them away from the classroom for a year. Least attractive to the teachers was a proposed year of uninterrupted graduate work. (See Table 1).

Table 1

Need For Additional Education

(301 Middle Grades Teachers)

	% of Teachers Ranking as #1	Mean Rank Score (1 to 4, high to Low
A program operated continuously during the school year which would give you an opportunity to work in collaboration with others in the development and testing of ideas	34.2%	2.1
An opportunity for informal consultation in depth with a disciplinary specialist who understands the problems you must deal with in the classroom.	32.2%	2.3
A specially designed intensive summer program to make available new materials and approaches.	17.6%	2.6
A year of uninterrupted graduate work.	15.9%	3.1

Need for Curriculum Materials

The middle grades teachers also ranked four different proposals for improving student curriculum materials which deal with politics and government. A majority of 57.2% considered brief, flexible teaching units focusing on the political implications of current social problems to be most needed. New materials which would examine the contributions of various ethnic groups or minorities in America were their second choice. They may have been reacting here to the failure of many of the standard textbooks to deal adequately with the political contributions of minorities. Apparently, this neglect is not construed to be a serious bias. For there appeared to be little concern over flagrant political or cultural bias in their present instructional materials. Only 9.6% ranked unbiased materials as a primary need. Least desired was the traditional and less flexible textbook format for dealing with politics and government. Only 6.6% gave first priority to a traditional textbook which would stress political aspects of social studies. (See Table 2).

Instructional Aids

Four types of teacher aids for political education were also rank-ordered on the basis of need. A majority of the teachers reported that their greatest need was for exercises which provide for group experiences in problem solving and decision making. Although the teachers conveyed a concern for actively involving their students in these processes of political learning, they showed the least interest in supplementing student classroom studies with first-hand

Table 2

Curriculum Materials Needs

(301 Middle Grades Teachers)

	% of Teachers Ranking as #1	Mean Rank Score (1 to 4, high to Low
Flexible, brief teaching units which stress political implications of factors related to significant problems--environmental, population, minorities.	57.2%	1.6
New materials which highlight intergroup relations and which examine the contribution of various groups to American life.	26.2%	2.2
New materials which are not culturally or politically biased.	9.6%	2.8
A new textbook which stresses political or governmental aspects of the social studies.	6.6%	3.2

field experiences of politics and government. Only 7% of the teachers considered guides to learning opportunities outside of the classroom of primary importance.

Some other types of classroom aids were considered important and needed for instruction. Close to forty percent of the teachers gave highest priority to two types of printed guidelines designed to assist them in utilizing already available materials for instruction on politics and government. A guidebook suggesting how existing materials in social studies and other subjects, such as reading and language arts, could be applied to political education was ranked as the most desired instructional aid by just over one-fourth of the teachers. (See Table 3).

Conclusions

This study assessed the academic and professional preparedness of middle grades teachers in a southern metropolitan area for their roles in the civic/political education of their students. The study revealed minimal academic preparation in political science, with the overwhelming majority of the teachers reporting American Government as the single course in their college education. This is not terribly surprising when it is considered that degree programs in elementary education usually require no more than an introductory political science course. However, a full twenty percent of the teachers reported that they had taken no undergraduate courses in political science.

Table 3

Instructional Aids Needs

(301 Middle Grades Teachers)

	% of Teachers Ranking as #1	Mean Rank Score (1 to 4, high to Low
Classroom exercises which provide an opportunity for collective or group participation in relevant decision-making or problem-solving processes.	52.8%	1.8
A specially prepared teachers' guide which would suggest how social studies materials you now use, as well as non social studies subjects such as reading, could be used to call attention to political phenomena, problems and processes.	26.4%	2.4
A guide to available classroom materials especially annotated or descriptively evaluated in terms of your needs.	13.3%	2.8
Suggestions for guiding students to take advantage of non classroom learning opportunities-community, family, TV or so on.	7.1%	3.0

For most of the teachers the undergraduate program had been the last opportunity to formally study about political topics. Very few had enrolled in post-graduate courses, social studies workshops or institutes after they had become teachers.

The apparent weakness in content background is one we should consider seriously, in regard to teachers of the middle grades, for at least two reasons. One, their students usually range from 10 to 13 years old. This is the age level in which students can be expected a) to have the cognitive capabilities to readily organize data and think concretely, and b) to be developing capabilities to think more abstractly (e.g. deductively and hypothetically) and to formulate general principles. Hence, Adelson and O'Neill report that 11 to 13 year olds are in the period of adolescence when "the most substantial advance" in understanding political ideas takes place.[4]

Another consideration is that the social studies curriculum for fifth, sixth and seventh grades typically includes the first detailed studies of citizenship and political participation, the structure of national and state governments, and American political history. In the middle grades students are called upon to apply political knowledge to political issues and make political comparisons and generalizations in social studies. The teacher's supporting knowledge of government and politics may make a difference in both the extent of motivation and the depth of investigation.

Likewise, it is likely that the middle grades teacher's professional skill in communicating knowledge and stimulating further inquiry contributes to the overall development of the political education of the students. As means of improving these professional competencies the metro middle grades teachers expressed a definite preference for more practical, on-the-job improvement programs as opposed to graduate and summer studies. No single improvement program was ranked first by a majority of the teachers. Some preferred collaboration with other teachers to improve political education, while others preferred to have political scientists assist them with practical instructional problems.

In regard to curriculum materials, the teachers indicated that they most desire brief, flexible materials which deal with political aspects of current social issues. Few called for the usual hardback social studies textbook. Extensive use of small-group learning centers in these grades probably enhances the desirability of modular materials with an issues focus.

As for teacher aids, the middle grades teachers expressed the most interest in guidelines to classroom activities which would provide students with opportunities to participate in group decision-making and problem solving. This interest in classroom activities which require analysis and choice-making, coupled with the desire for more issue-oriented materials, suggests that a majority of these teachers have determined that the traditional, chronology-of-facts treatment of government and politics fails to develop civic competencies.

The Atlanta-area teachers surveyed cannot be considered representative of teachers throughout the State of Georgia. Rather, they are likely to be a select group. Their counties are reputed to have higher standards for hiring and retention and higher salaries than other parts of the state. Therefore, middle grades teachers of the rest of the state may be even less well prepared to achieve the civic education objectives of the social studies curriculum.

This study by itself provides only a sketch of the whole picture, but it offers some indicators of the larger scene to be studied in Georgia and in the country. If the school is, as Hess and Torney claim, an "important and effective instrument of political socialization,"[5] then we must consider teachers as potentially having a significant influence. The instructional materials they use, the educational techniques they apply and their own knowledge of government and politics are likely to be influential in the political education of their students.

The implications are obvious. The years preceding secondary school are not to be neglected. Social Studies educators and political scientists must further investigate the needs of middle grades teachers, learn more about them and attempt to provide the special courses, instructional materials and teaching aids which can improve the political education of young Americans.

FOOTNOTES

1. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, Political Knowledge and Attitudes, Report 03-SS-01. Washington, D. C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Printing Office, 1973, reports selected results of the national survey of young Americans aged 9, 13, 17 and 26-35.

2. Reported in the NAEP Newsletter published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Denver, Colorado, 7 (January-February, 1974) p. 1. See also the DEA News published by the American Political Science Association Division of Educational Affairs, Spring, 1974 for additional comments on the implications of the NAEP report.

3. A project of the American Political Science Association's Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education supported by the National Science Foundation, headquartered at The Mershon Center, Ohio State University with Richard C. Snyder and Richard C. Remy as co-directors.

4. See Joseph Adelson and Robert P. O'Neil, "The Growth of Political Ideas in Adolescence: The Sense of Community," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 4 (July-December, 1966) 295-306.

5. Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney, The Development of Political Attitudes in Children. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967, p. 101.